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Yosemite

Nature Notes

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YOSEMITE

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IN COOPERATION WITH THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE.



Rev. La Rue C. Watson and his Model T Ford at the Mariposa Grove enroute to Yosemite Valley, July 10, 1922.

—Photographs by author

y o s e m i t e

NATURE NOTES

Since 1922, the monthly publication of the National Park Service and the Yosemite Natural History Association in Yosemite National Park.

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Douglass H. Hubbard, Park Naturalist

Robert F. Upton, Associate Park Naturalist

Paul F. McCrary, Assistant Park Naturalist

Herbert D. Cornell, Junior Park Naturalist

Robert A. Grom, Park Naturalist Trainee

VOL. XXXVIII

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A TIN LIZZIE AND DIRT ROADS

Rev. LaRue C. Watson

As I recently glided swiftly, easily and comfortably into the Yosemite Valley on the Wawona Road, in the late model car of a friend, it reminded me of another entrance I had made — it was so different!

The previous trip was in July 1922, 37 years ago, at a time when there was not one paved road into the Valley. I didn't want to go out the same way, so I asked a park ranger as to the best route for leaving the Valley when I got ready to go. He gave me the classic answer of those days, "It doesn't make any difference. No matter which road you take you'll wish you had taken some other one."

It was in the days of the Model T Ford, of sainted memory, with wide running boards and flat fenders on which great quantities of luggage and camping equipment could be piled, with plenty of steel rods in the upper structure of the car to

which the load could be tied.

At the time I was pastor of the Congregational Church at Tehachapi. When my annual vacation time arrived I took my wife and three children to my father's home on a ranch near Visalia, where we spent a few days in preparation for the "Great Adventure."

Saturday a.m., July 8, 1922, when I cranked the "Tin Lizzie" to start our journey, you could scarcely see the flivver or its occupants on account of the baggage piled high on the outside.

We left our six year old son, Glenn, with my mother on the ranch. Going with me were my father, Rev. C. E. Watson, my wife, Metta, and our daughters Violet, ten years old, and Agneeta, four and a half years old.

That first day we drove about 137 miles via Madera and Raymond to Nipinnawassee, where we camped over Sunday near a schoolhouse.



At the Wawona Tunnel Tree. Rev. Watson and daughter Violet.

Monday, July 10, we drove about 34 miles to Wawona, where we drove just across the river and set up our camp for the night on the meadow, near the river. Not far away was the old historic covered bridge.

On the way to Wawona we took the side trip through the Mariposa Big Tree Grove, driving through the tunnel in the Wawona Tree, and eating lunch beside the Grizzly Giant Tree, where President William Howard Taft and John Muir and their party were photographed in 1909.

Tuesday, July 11, we drove about 27 miles into the Yosemite Valley, eating lunch on the way at Inspiration Point, which is about 900 feet higher than the present observation terrace at the end of the tunnel as you enter the Valley.

What a drive that was! For miles that seemed endless we could not go over five miles per hour without

danger of bouncing the car into a mass of wreckage. It was the most "washboardy" dirt road I ever saw! It was worse than driving over railroad ties.

From the constant physical strain of holding my foot firmly on the "low" pedal and the brake, I was trembling with exhaustion when we reached the Valley floor. My brake linings were burned out and a spring was broken. Thank goodness, even in those early days there was a garage in the Valley.

We made camp with our own tents in Lower Camp 16, which judge was about where the Housekeeping Camp now is, about half way between Camp Curry and the old Yosemite Village. In one direction we had a clear view of Upper Yosemite Fall, and in the opposite direction we could see Glacie Point.

Deer often wandered right through our camp; bucks, does and fawns. This was in contrast with my recent visit when I saw lots of deer, but they were all does. At least one or two times, in the evening, we drove down the Valley a short distance to the garbage dump. There the visitors formed an arc with their cars, with their headlights pointed to the center, where numerous bears fed on the garbage, completely ignoring the people and the lights.

During the weeks we were in the Valley we walked and rode to all points of interest on the Valley floor, and took many hikes up the trails to the top of Yosemite Falls, Glacier Point, Vernal and Nevada Falls, etc. After one of these strenuous hikes we adults would return to camp thoroughly tired out, but the girls would still be ready to play tag and romp around camp.

My father and I went swimming in the plunges at Camp Curry and Yosemite Lodge. In those days there was already a museum in the Valley, and a zoo, which I understand has been discontinued as a matter of principle.

Both July 19 and 20 there was heavy rain for several hours, with a little hail on the latter day.

Saturday, July 22, my father and I loaded ourselves like pack horses with blankets, food, canteens, etc., and hiked past Vernal and Nevada Falls to the head of Little Yosemite Valley, where we bedded down on the ground for the night. We estimated that we had hiked about nine and a half miles from camp. Here in the Little Yosemite Valley we inspected an old abandoned cabin, whose history I do not know.

As father was in poor health, he decided that one night of such

Camping in Yosemite Valley, Lower Camp 16, in 1922.





Contrary to National Park Service policy, a zoo was maintained in Yosemite National Park in 1922. The Service believes that for the fullest enjoyment and appreciation of park wildlife, they should be seen in their natural surroundings.

roughing it was enough, so the next day we walked back to camp via the horse trail, which we estimated to be about ten and a half miles.

My vacation time passed all too swiftly, and at 6:00 a.m. on Saturday, July 29, we had our outfit loaded and started home via the Wawona-Merced Road. We ate breakfast at Chinquapin and noon lunch beside the road. We had supper in a restaurant in Madera and reached father's ranch near Visalia about midnight.

We estimated that I drove about 180 miles that day. In these days of easy grades, paved roads and modern autos, that would be nothing to talk about, but in "those good old days" of heavy grades, rough dirt roads, and Tin Lizzies, it was a real day's work!

But that was not my first visit to Yosemite Valley. Six years earlier in July 1916, now 43 years ago, attended the annual convention of the Northern California Congregational Conference at Camp Curry. took the Southern Pacific train to Merced on July 23, 1916, arriving there at 10:30 a.m. At 2:15 p.m. left Merced on the Yosemite Valley Railroad, which I understand has since been deactivated, and arrived at El Portal, the end of the line, at 6:10 p.m.

At 6:50 p.m., I left El Portal on the auto stage and about 9:00 p.m. arrived at Camp Curry. The stage had several wide seats, but no top, giving the passengers an unobstructed view of the tall trees and towering cliffs and waterfalls.

A feature of the nightly campfires

and some other occasions at Camp Curry was the voice of David Curry, "The Stentor of the Yosemite," and the proprietor of Camp Curry. He was very proud of his loud and far-carrying voice. At the campfires he would face Glacier Point about half a mile above the camp and shout "Hel-lo Gla-cier, Yoo-Hoo," and then jokingly boast that his voice carried four miles via the Four-Mile trail, to Glacier Point.

Daily when the stage departed for El Portal, Curry's stentorian voice would boom "Fare-well, Yoo-Hoo." In those days I had a pretty good voice myself, and as our stage be-

gan to roll, a mischievous impulse took possession of me. Curry's mouth was open, just ready for his farewell shout, when I cut loose with a pretty good imitation of his usual farewell.

A look of blank astonishment spread over his face. As we rolled out of sight his mouth was still open, but not a sound came forth. Mr. Curry died the next year and I never had an opportunity to apologize to him.

Now, after all these 43 years and two subsequent visits, the beauty and grandeur of the Yosemite Valley are still an abiding impression in my life.

CONSERVATION QUOTE

Fortunately for all of us, parks have quite different meaning which concerns itself, Anthaeus-like, with the physical necessity of man to keep in touch with nature. It is that eon-old longing of the soul to find a haven of rest. No matter how much we do indirectly by way of sports and athletics for the body, the spiritual hunger and search for things hidden is the true answer to the question, "Why parks." Parks are the dietetics of the soul—a refuge, a place to regain spiritual balance and find strength and, if needed, a place of respite from the turbulent world without.

—Richard Lieber

GREAT SIERRA
MINE CABIN,
TIOGA HILL

This old cabin
is being
stabilized as
a museum in
place by the
National Park
Service and
interested
volunteers.

Photo by
Walter Huber, 1919



*be superlative natural landscapes and the outstanding historic sites of
the world should be preserved and their integrity zealously guarded.
The great scenic areas furnish the inspirational, recreational, and educational
values so greatly needed today. The preservation of historic sites
will generate love of country and enable those of the present generation
to familiarize themselves with, and to understand, the struggles and
accomplishments of those who preceded them.*

HILLORY A. TOLSON
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

EDIBLE WILD PLANTS

Glenn B. Coy, Ranger-Naturalist

Have you ever wondered which of our native plants are edible? Can a person really "live off the land?" The answer to these questions is best made by studying the food habits of the Indians who were forced to live on what they could find.

Many authorities in the past have described the tribes of California as decadent and lacking in ambition. This opinion stems from the fact that they were mere food gatherers rather than hunters as were the Indians of the plains, or agriculturists as those of the Southwest and East. However, where food is plentiful in the wild form, both in plant and ani-

mal life, there is no reason for exertion of agriculture or nomadic wandering. Detailed organization of tribes is necessary when wars threaten, but no wars are necessary when there is more than plenty for all. The Indians of California had found that security of which everyone dreams and, although it was not a land flowing with "milk and honey"; it was, nevertheless, a land teaming with acorns and game.

The chief food of most Indians in California was the acorn. Oak trees of many varieties abound in our state from a Coast Live Oak (*Quercus agrifolia*) to the Black Oak (*Q. kel-*



A chuck-ah was used to store acorns over the winter months.

logii) of the mid-mountain regions. All acorns require some leaching as the Spaniards found to their discomfort, but some have less tannate than others. These were more popular among the tribes which had a choice. In the coastal areas the Coast Live Oak was the preferred tree. As they moved inland, the Valley White Oak (*Q. lobata*) became the favorite. This was replaced in the foothills by the Canyon Live Oak (*Q. chrysolepis*) and by the Black Oak in the lower part of the Transition Life Zone. These acorns were usually ground and cooked into a mush or cakes. One problem with the deciduous Black Oak was that its acorns took two seasons to mature and, therefore, the yield would be fat or lean.

Inevitably, when the acorn crop was disappointing, other plants were used to take its place. One of those used by the tribes in the foothill valleys was the California Buckeye (*Aesculus californica*). One problem was caused by the fact that these seeds were extremely poisonous. They required an extensive process of leaching and cooking before they could be eaten safely. As a result they were only used in emergencies.

A diet based solely on acorn mush would be quite monotonous and nutritionally unsound. A great variety of foods were eaten to supplement the staple part of the menu. In the grassland plains the roots of the Wild Onions (*Allium*) were dug from the ground and eaten raw or cooked while the tender shoots of the Tumbleweed (*Amaranthis*) were cooked like spinach or eaten raw. Later, Mustard, and Lamb's Quarters, and the Ice Plant (*Mesembryanthemum crystallinum*) were introduced from other parts of the world and eaten the same way. In the Cuyama Valley and around Mt. Pinos the berries of

the Buffalo Berry (*Shepardia argentea*) were eaten as were the seeds of many wild grasses. The seeds of the Wild Sunflower (*Helianthus*) were eaten much as peanuts are eaten today.

For those Indians living in the regions of swamps, the Cat-Tail (*Typha*) provided roots which could be eaten raw or ground into flour. These were rich in protein but were not as rich in oil as cornmeal. Flowers were boiled and made into soup. The Arrowhead (*Sagittaria*) and the Tule (*Scirpus lacustris*) provided roots which were roasted or boiled. These taste somewhat like a potato.

The chaparral covered hills provided an abundant variety of berries and seeds while in their stream canyons lived green plants for variety. The seeds of the Hollyleaf Cherry (*Prunus ilicifolia*) were called islay by the Indians. Its fruits were discarded. Many varieties of berries were found in the Blackberries, Huckleberries (*Vaccinium*) California Holly (*Photinia arbutifolia*), Currants and Gooseberries (*Ribes*). The Serviceberry (*Amelanchier alnifolia*) was dried and made into loaves sometimes weighing 10 or 15 pounds. These were often flat, round disks that were sometimes eaten without cooking in the winter or thrown into stews or soups. By some tribes they were pounded into dried meat and fat to form pemmican. The red berries of the Buckthorn (*Rhamnus*) were eaten raw but had the embarrassing faculty of turning the bodies of the diners into a red color. The berries of the Squawbush (*Rhus trilobata*) made a very refreshing beverage when soaked in water.

The leaves of the California Laurel (*Umbellularia californica*) were, and are used today for flavoring of meats and stews giving to them a bay

flavor. The leaves of the Miner's Lettuce (*Montia perfoliata*) provided miners and Spaniards as well as Indians with salad greens and pot-herbs. Incidentally, in reverse of the usual trend this plant has been introduced into Europe where it is cultivated under the name Winter Purslane. Another addition was the Lupine whose new shoots were eaten in the spring. Indian Thistle provided roots which were eaten raw or cooked.

The forested areas of the mountains such as the Sierra Nevada were not very productive of food materials. Few Indians lived in them for more than just a summer visitation. One exception is the Miwok occupation of Yosemite. The abundance of Black Oaks may account for this. Nevertheless, there were a number of plants which provided berries, nuts, and potherbs. The Manzanita (*Arctostaphylos*) provided berries which were soaked in water and made into a delicious cider. Sometimes they were eaten fresh or

cooked into a mush. Some tribes dried them and ground them into a powder which they called pinole. We are told, though, that one hazard was they were considered hard to digest. The wild Gooseberry (*Ribes*) and the Thimble-berry (*Rubus parviflorus*) were eaten with relish in season or were dried. The nuts of the Chinquapin (*Castanea*) and the Hazelnut (*Corylus rostrata*) were considered a welcome break from the monotony of an acorn mush diet.

The meadows of the Transition forests are the areas of abundant potherbs. These provide the Cows Parsnip (*Heracleum lanatum*) and Milkweed (*Asclepias*) which were used as potherbs like spinach. One of the Cow Parsnip's relatives, the Water Hemlock (*Cicuta*), is deadly poison, however, and is easily mistaken. The blossoms of the Milkweed were also used for sweetening. Squaws would go out in the early morning and shake the nectar into a pot. After the flowering season was over the pods were collected and eaten fried. The underground shoots

Tu-bu-ce prepares acorns for the making of acorn mush and bread.



of the Fireweed were boiled and eaten in the early spring.

The Indians of California used quite a few roots as vegetables. The early miners, observing them busy digging roots, named them Digger Indians, which became their common name around the camps. Camass (*Camassia*), the Leopard Lily (*Lilium*), and the Swamp Onion (*Allium validum*) all provided roots which were flavoring for soups and stew. The roots of the Mariposa Tulip (*Calochortus venustus*) were also boiled and eaten. In other parts of the country members of this genus are called Sego Lilies. The root of the Balsam Root (*Balsamorrhiza sagittata*) was cooked by the Nez Perce Indians on hot stones. It is said to

have a sweet and agreeable taste. The roots and coiled fronds of the Bracken Fern (*Pteris aquillina*) were also cooked and eaten.

It seems evident that the natives of California were neither in danger of starvation nor suffering from a monotonous diet. One should be cautious, though, in experimenting too freely with eating these food plants since some of them, like the acorn, required special treatment. Also, our food tastes may not be like those of the Indians who may have had to acquire a liking through the exigencies of circumstance. Many early settlers and trappers have described Indian foods in not too complimentary as well to contemplate the nuback to our more traditional fare.

For many years Tu-bu-ce showed and explained to visitors the ways of the Indians. Here she demonstrates their method of gathering seeds.





Many publications on Yosemite's natural history and human history are available from the Yosemite Natural History Association. Above are just a few of the special issues of Yosemite Nature Notes. A complete listing is on the opposite page.

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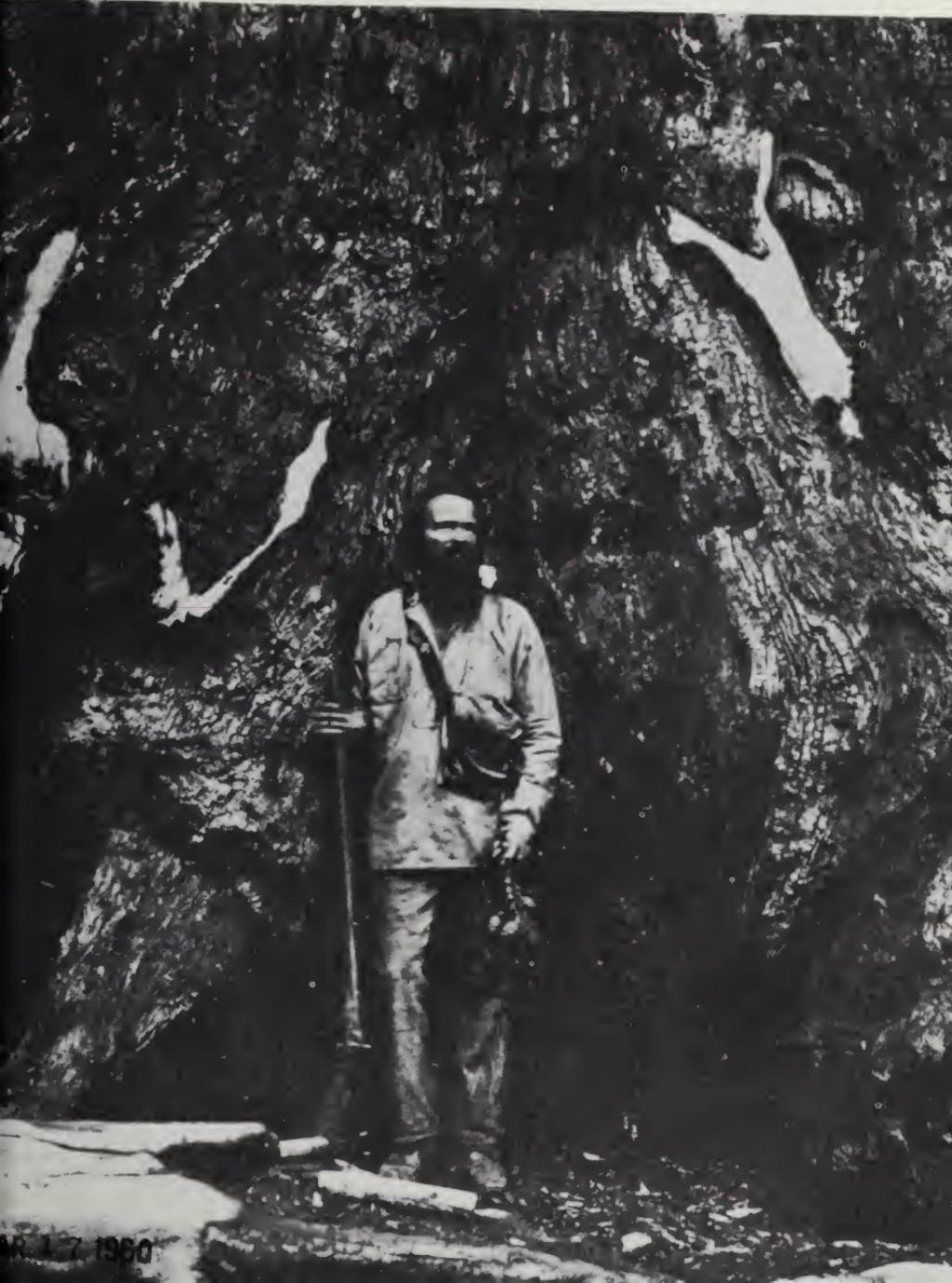
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